Reducing unnecessary social worker workload through hybrid working and digital practice

Research report

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The involvement and engagement of the 22 local authorities taking part in this project ensured that the work was focused on what would make a difference in social work practice, to children and families and to social workers. The feedback they provided on the practice resources developed during this project was essential in checking the resources would be practical and useful for social workers and the social care workforce.

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Introduction

This short report is published as part of a suite of supplementary reports from the work of the National Workload Action Group (NWAG). NWAG was established by the Department for Education to identify potential solutions to reduce unnecessary social worker workload, so that social workers could focus on necessary activities. The suite of supplementary reports provide additional detail about the activity and findings of each of the workstreams: admin support, workload and caseload management, supervision, hybrid working and digital practice and the use of AI in case recording. The NWAG Final Report summarises the NWAG activity and recommendations.

This supplementary report describes how hybrid working and flexible working approaches are being used to support social worker wellbeing and highlights potential risks and challenges. The supplementary report also looks at digital practice in social work, and makes the case that this be prioritised, both as a means of potentially reducing unnecessary social worker workload, and also as a practical way of engaging with young people and the emerging workforce who are more familiar with digital tools and spaces. The approach NWAG took to this project and identifying potential solutions is outlined. The key messages section describes the project insights. The recommendations for further activity are contained within the NWAG Final Report

As part of this project, practical learning resources containing downloadable tools to support organisations in thinking about hybrid working and using digital practice approaches are available on Support for social workers.

Hybrid working and digital practice in social care

Defining hybrid working

The impact of hybrid working on social workers and the adults, children and families accessing social care services is not yet fully understood. This supplementary report explores the benefits and challenges of hybrid working as they relate to workload considerations for social workers. Hybrid working and flexible working are inextricably linked. In this supplementary report, the term ‘hybrid’ refers to the location where social workers work, including the office, at home or in their car. Hybrid working is inextricably linked with the term ‘flexible working’ which refers to working hours. This supplementary report explores the impact of hybrid working on unnecessary social worker workload and includes reference to flexible working where relevant.

Defining digital practice

In this supplementary report, the term ‘digital practice’ refers to the application of digital skills - how social work is practised using digital methods. Examples are using video calls to explore life story work with a young person, or to provide arms-length support to a family to develop morning routines using video and messaging apps to provide oversight and reminders. ‘Digital practice’ does not mean the acquisition of digital skills in this context. Digital practice is a new area of practice which emerged during the pandemic. In some local authority areas this has continued, but in others it has fallen away.

Understanding digital practice is essential

Digital social work practice is not yet well understood but has the potential to enable social workers to work with children and young people in digital spaces, where they may be most comfortable. While not advocating that social work practice with children and families should **only** be digital, social workers should be able to move confidently between physical and digital spaces in their practice. How social workers make decisions about using digital spaces, how they enable and empower children and young people to make choices about where they work with social workers, and how digital practice is understood by those in supervisory roles responsible for managing practice quality, are important considerations for everyone in social work.

The young people growing up in a dual world, where they are often as comfortable in digital spaces as they are in physical spaces (sometimes more so) are now entering the workforce. Employer understanding of the duality of the digital and physical lives of the emerging workforce will impact on decisions about the place and space of social work practice, and the direction of professional practice. It is particularly important that senior

leaders recognise this and understand how the workforce is changing and practice likely to change along with it.

Hybrid working, digital practice and ‘unnecessary workload’

In discussions about unnecessary workload, hybrid working and digital practice, assumptions are often made that working from home and using technology will increase productivity. Increased productivity may be achieved through reducing unnecessary travel time, increasing uninterrupted periods of focused work and improving connectivity with children and young people in geographically distant placements. This may be true, but not for everyone, and not all the time.

It may be useful to broaden our focus to the impact of hybrid working and digital practice on the effectiveness and impact of social work practice. Improved social worker wellbeing was reported by the Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN)[1] as a product of hybrid working and may contribute to increasing retention and the continuity of relationships with families.

Direct practice with children and young people in the digital places they are most comfortable might effectively establish supportive relationships earlier. Social workers may be able to begin therapeutic work with children and young people earlier in the process. Children and young people may respond more positively to social work intervention if it takes place in the digital space and if they have increased choice and control about where they meet with social workers. These benefits contribute to ‘reducing unnecessary workload’ through practice being more efficient and more effective.

Hybrid working and digital practice present both opportunities and challenges which employers and social workers need to understand and take account of, to achieve maximum impact on workload and retention.

Understanding the context of hybrid working in social work

Social work has always been a ‘hybrid’ activity, with practice taking place in different locations, such as the office, in the family home, at school and in the social worker’s car. Until the COVID-19 pandemic, social work activities were mostly ‘in-person’, interspersed with emails and phone calls. The social work profession values face-to-face interaction with children, young people and their families, promoting this as an essential component of practice. NWAG members highlighted the importance of in-person visits to the family

[1] The collective name given to the 22 local authorities who supported the review and testing of thinking and resources for the NWAG project.

home so that social workers understand the family living environment and see the context for the family 'beyond the screen.'

How COVID-19 changed social work practice

COVID-19 changed the ways social work was practised. Lockdown restricted in-person activities but children still needed support and protection: local authorities moved social work practice to online spaces when face-to-face contact was not permitted using available technology. Because this was an emergency situation, this shift in practice came with limited guidance, often narrowly focused on how to use the technology. Social workers no longer worked from an office base but from a home base.

Working from home during the pandemic had benefits and disadvantages.[2,3] Advances in technology accelerated the availability and functionality of software to communicate with colleagues and the children and families social workers were working with. This made working from home possible. It also highlighted the inequity that exists within the workforce and with the families social workers work with – many social workers lacked an office set-up at home and found working from home challenging. Some reported struggling to maintain a professional distance from families who could now see more of their personal lives.

This change impacted on families too - many families did not have laptops or reliable broadband connections, and these had to be provided by the local authority to enable contact. COVID-19 was a leveller which reinforced our need for connectedness to each other and changed the relationship between employer and employee, social worker and family. COVID-19 may have ended, but many of the impacts of pandemic working practices continue.

The growing popularity of hybrid working arrangements

Many social workers continue to work from home for part of the week, commonly defined as 'hybrid working'. Hybrid working has evolved alongside councils reducing expenditure on council buildings, moving to 'hot desking' and 'call centre' solutions to reduce costs.[4] Many local authorities no longer have the office space for all employees to be office based.

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[2] McFadden, P., Gillen, P. Moriarty, J., Mallett, J., Schroder, H., Ravalier, J., Manthorpe, J Currie, D., Nicholl, P., McGrory, S., Neill, R. (2021) *Health and social care workers' quality of working life and coping while working during the COVID 19 pandemic: Findings from a UK Survey*.

[3] Research in Practice. (2023). *Social work and child protection beyond the COVID-19 pandemic: Key challenges and good practice.* Available at: https://www.researchinpractice.org.uk/children/publications/2023/january/social-work-and-child-protection-beyond-the-covid-19-pandemic-key-challenges-and-good-practice/ (Accessed: 9 April 2025).

[4] This started in many local authorities before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local authorities have generally developed their own working practices governing hybrid working, with little known of 'what works' or promising practice being shared across the sector as hybrid working practices emerge. NWAG members broadly supported social employers retaining flexibility to develop hybrid working practices for their employment context rather than define a single 'solution' for children's social care.

The right to request 'flexible working' arrangements

The introduction of the Employment relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 provides employees with the right to make a statutory flexible working request from the first day of employment to change their working hours, days and where they work. This has reinforced the need for hybrid working to continue. It seems unlikely that social work, which has been more 'hybrid' than many other professions, will return to being wholly office-based, particularly in local authorities which have moved to hot-desking and other cost-saving solutions which may not be easily changed.

The long-term impact of hybrid working is unknown

NWAG members emphasised that the long-term impact of hybrid working (where and when social workers work) is not yet known, and gathering more evidence of 'what works' will inform future practice. For example, early career practitioners may be less positive about remote working as they are not able to benefit from discussion with more experienced peers and colleagues in the office[5] particularly where hot-desking is in place. NWAG members noted that this may impact negatively on their professional development and confidence. More experienced social workers in supervisory roles will need to develop new skills and knowledge to support practitioners effectively through virtual meetings and other digital practice approaches.

Hybrid working may not work for everyone

NWAG members flagged the risk that 'reasonable adjustments' may not always be considered when making decisions about hybrid working arrangements. They noted that hybrid working arrangements might enhance or reduce the impact of reasonable adjustments. Because of this, employers should actively consider reasonable adjustments when developing or reviewing hybrid working policies and practices.

Through discussion at NWAG meetings, members explored the impact of changing generational expectations of work, and how this might impact on future decisions about where and when work takes place. Working from home may mean that employees

[5] Miller, E. and Barrie, K. (2022). *Setting the Bar for Social Work in Scotland*. [online] strathprints.strath.ac.uk. Available at: https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/84364/.(Accessed 8 April 2025)

continue to work when they are unwell, for example, making it challenging for supervisors to assess worker wellbeing. The impact of 'back-to-back meetings' all day, which often happens when working from home, can reduce the contact between those working in the office and those working from home. Organisational policy about online meetings can help mitigate this, such as reducing meeting times to 45 minutes to allow a 15-minute break between meetings or having 'meeting free' times where those working at home and working in the office can have informal discussions.

NWAG members highlighted the impact of digital poverty, and poor digital infrastructure in rural areas, and the impact this has on implementing hybrid working arrangements that work for children and families as well as for social workers.

Effective implementation of hybrid working needs planning and review

Project activity focused on identifying the benefits and challenges of hybrid working, developing a resource to support employers in thinking about how they could measure the impact of hybrid working on productivity, professional development, peer interactivity and supervision. Members concluded that hybrid working arrangements have benefits overall, making the workforce more agile and responsive to changing need while improving social worker wellbeing. However, challenges exist in implementation without careful thought and planning about maximising inclusion and providing sufficient support in the right spaces (at home, in the office and online).

Digital practice in the context of professional social work

Digital capabilities were identified as being integral to social work practice by Taylor in 2017,[6] suggesting that social workers should become competent in the use of digital technology before exploring how using digital methods might enhance practice. Outside the UK, digital social work emerged earlier, with online therapy part of the regulated social work profession in many states in the United States, but despite this, the adoption of technology by social workers in the US was inconsistent.[7]

The development of digital practice in social work in the UK

The profession-wide use of digital methods to practise social work emerged during COVID-19 in the UK as part of the emergency response to lockdown. Research and guidance often focused on the skills and competencies needed by social workers to use

[6] Taylor, A. (2017) *Social work and digitalisation: bridging the knowledge gaps*, Social Work Education, 36(8), pp. 869–879. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2017.1361924.
[7] Great Valley Publishing Company, Inc (2017). *The High-Tech Social Worker -- Myth or Reality?* [online] Socialworktoday.com. Available at: https://www.socialworktoday.com/archive/011917p10.shtml. (Accessed 8 April 2025)

digital technology, rather than exploring the use of digital in practice,[8] recognising there were skills gaps. Some studies did highlight the use of digital, such as exploring the practice of 'virtual home visits'[9] as a new way of practicing social work.

As social worker skill and competence in the use of digital technology improved, and technology advanced, online practices have continued to evolve. A digital capability framework for social workers was produced[10] and digital skills are referenced in Social Work England's Professional Standards.[11]

Digital practice and reducing unnecessary social worker workload

There is a risk that moving to digital practice is primarily seen as a way of speeding up social work processes,[12] and reducing social worker workload. While technology, including AI (which we discuss in another supplementary report), has the capability to reduce or remove some tasks currently done by social workers through automation, it should not replace the building blocks of professional decision-making, such as assessment.

Revisiting digital practice post-COVID-19

NWAG members noted that many local authorities may not have revisited their approach to digital working since the pandemic ended: in some areas, practice has returned to face-to-face interactions, although many local authorities continue to use video conferencing for meetings to encourage attendance from multi-agency professionals. We were not able to identify examples of guidance for staff on how to make decisions about the use of digital in practice, for example, but did not speak to every local authority about this. Social work employers may wish to revisit local guidance on digital practice to ensure it remains fit for purpose.

Digital practice skills needed at all levels

Digital spaces inhabit every aspect of our everyday lives. Children, young people and young adults seamlessly move between digital and physical spaces, often with rich lives

[8] BASW (2021). *Digital capabilities for social workers*. [online] Basw.co.uk. Available at: https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/digital-capabilities-social-workers. (Accessed 8 April 2025)
[9] Cook, L. and Zschomler, D. (2020). *Child and family social work in the context of COVID-19: current practice issues and innovations: Research Briefing*. [online] ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk. Norwich: Centre for Research on the Child and Family (CRCF). Available at: https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/75973/.(Accessed 8 April 2025)
[10] BASW (2021). *Digital capabilities for social workers*. [online] Basw.co.uk. Available at: https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/digital-capabilities-social-workers. (Accessed 8 April 2025)
[11] Social Work England (2019). *Professional Standards*. [online] Social Work England. Available at: https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/standards/professional-standards/ (Accessed 8 April 2025)
[12] BASW (2021). *Digital capabilities for social workers*. [online] Basw.co.uk. Available at: https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/digital-capabilities-social-workers (Accessed 8 April 2025)

in both. Those who did not access digital technology until they were adults, on the other hand, may be less certain about navigating unfamiliar digital spaces or using new technology, and often express a preference for face-to-face interactions. NWAG members noted that leadership in the digital space can be challenging – how we behave and respond online can have a very different impact to face-to-face interactions. While we often focus on the skills needed for digital social work practice, there is a parallel need for digital leadership skills, so that supervisors, managers and leaders understand and are able to navigate the digital work, moving seamlessly between them, understanding the benefits and challenges of each.

To demonstrate our commitment to working effectively with children and young people, and their families, and to develop a workforce fit for the future, NWAG members supported social workers developing the skills and knowledge needed to understand how to practice effectively using digital methods. Supervisors should know how to provide meaningful supervision digitally. Senior leaders should understand how practice is changing and developing and set a strong and clear practice framework which includes digital practice.

Project approach

Literature review scope

A desktop review of publicly available academic and grey literature was carried out to identify the key themes for exploration in focus groups and interviews, drawing on previous work by Research in Practice on digital practice.[13] Search terms used related to digital, technology and children's social work. This excluded some significant areas of research, such as:

- perceptions of, and the impact of, online harms to children and young people[14]
- the use of technology-enabled care in adult social care settings

We noted that there was little research and discussion about the impact of hybrid working and digital practice in social work on children, young people and families. Anecdotally, young people are very clear about the benefits of digital practice. Including and involving children, young people and families in assessing the impact of hybrid working and digital practice should be a future line of enquiry.

Because hybrid working and digital practice are still emerging, the research evidence base is relatively small.

Literature review themes of hybrid working and digital practice

Social workers need digital skills and capabilities for effective practice

The importance of social workers developing skills and capabilities in using digital methods was emphasised, highlighting the need for structured training to enhance social workers' confidence and competence in digital tools.[15] Taylor-Beswick[16] highlights the importance of preparing students for digital practice by bridging knowledge gaps in social

[13] Research in Practice (2022) *Rethinking digital practice*, DfE (unpublished)
[14] During focus group discussions, some participants expressed anxiety about the increasing societal focus on online harms, feeling that they did not know how to provide support to young people who may be at risk of online harm, often removing digital devices leading to isolating the young person from peers.
[15] BASW (2021). *Digital capabilities for social workers*. [online] Basw.co.uk. Available at: https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/digital-capabilities-social-workers. (Accessed 8 April 2025)
[16] Taylor-Beswick, A. M. L. (2022) *Digitalizing social work education: preparing students to engage with twenty-first century practice need*, *Social Work Education*, 42(1), pp. 44–64. doi: 10.1080/02615479.2022.2049225.

work education. The development of digital skills as viewed as foundational to effective professional practice.[17]

The impact of digital practice on relational working in social work

Social workers' experience of challenges and tensions in how to practice in a relational way without being physically present features significantly in the literature.[18] Ferguson et al[19] argue for the need to conceptualise a fresh social work practice to encompass hybrid practice. Byrne and Kirwan,[20] in a pre-pandemic paper, highlight the opportunities that digital presents in enhancing relational practice whilst at the same time pointing to the potentially limiting factor of not being physically present. Jeyasingham and Devlin[21] highlight the risk of losing the nuance of face-to-face interactions in purely digital exchanges.

Conversely, the empowering nature of digital in social work practice means that children, young people and families are able to choose how, when and where they connect with services in new ways.

Digital practice can empower and include, or disempower and exclude

Digital practice can improve inclusive practices for social workers and the children and families they support. For example, MacDonald et al.[22] highlighted the value of digital tools for maintaining relationships both with and between looked-after children. But inclusion through digital is not universal. Inequity is increased as the gap widens between those who have access to digital skills and resources and those who don't. Children and

[17] Jisc (2024). *Individual digital capabilities*. [online] JISC. Available at: https://digitalcapability.jisc.ac.uk/what-is-digital-capability/individual-digital-capabilities/ (Accessed 8 April 2025)
[18] Pink, S., Ferguson, H. and Kelly, L. (2021). *Digital social work: Conceptualising a hybrid anticipatory practice.* Qualitative Social Work, [online] 21(2), p.147332502110036. doi:https://doi.org/10.1177/14733250211003647.
[19] Ferguson, H., Kelly, L. and Pink, S. (2021). *Social work and child protection for a post-pandemic world: the re-making of practice during COVID-19 and its renewal beyond it.* Journal of Social Work Practice, 36(1), pp.1–20. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2021.1922368.
[20] Byrne, J. and Kirwan, G. (2019). *Relationship-based social work and electronic communication technologies: anticipation, adaptation and achievement.* Journal of Social Work Practice, 33(2), pp.217–232. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2019.1604499.
[21] Dharman Jeyasingham and Devlin, J. (2024). *Hybrid and Digitally Mediated Practice in Child and Family Social Work: Impacts on More and Less Experienced Practitioners' Communication, Relationships, Sense-Making and Experiences of Work.* The British Journal of Social Work, 54(5). doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae025.
[22] MacDonald, M., Wright, A.C., Taylor-Beswick, A., Gillespie, K. and Collings, S. (2022). Digital Relationality, Rights, Resilience: Conceptualising a Digital Social Ecology for Children's Birth Family Relationships When in Care or Adopted. *The British Journal of Social Work*. doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac140

young people report that using digital increases choice and diversity. However, technology (or the lack of it) can further exclude marginalised groups.[23]

The impact of digital and hybrid working on practitioner wellbeing

Much of the literature reviewing the impact of lockdown explored aspects of practitioner wellbeing, often focusing on the perceived negative impact of hybrid working on practitioners. BASW[24] highlights social worker views of the pressures of remote working and the impact of 'digital overload' on their mental health. The House of Commons Library report[25] explores the emotional toll of digital practice during the pandemic. Jeyasingham and Devlin[26] highlight how digital tools can create a digital disconnect for less experienced practitioners. These examples highlight how little we know about the long-term impact of hybrid working and digital practice on the health, wellbeing and professional development of social workers and the importance of investing in understanding more, so employers can make informed decisions about how and where social workers work.

The relationship between hybrid working, digital practice and productivity

Much of the research identifies productivity benefits of using digital, however literature focused on COVID-19 and workload identified early challenges experienced by many social workers, including the overwhelming use of email and back-to-back online meetings, leading to digital fatigue. Foster and Foley[27] are among many who noted that during the pandemic, social workers frequently faced interruptions due to unreliable digital infrastructure. The fragmented nature of digital tools,[28] alongside multiple passwords and different systems, frustrate the intention to improve productivity.

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[23] Parr-Morley, B. (2022). *Included: how to support young people who face disadvantage to thrive online | Catch22*. [online] Catch22. Available at: https://www.catch-22.org.uk/resources/included-supporting-young-people-to-thrive-online/ (Accessed 8 Feb. 2025).
[24] BASW (2022). *Happy to be a social worker but feeling the pressure, major survey finds*. [online] www.basw.co.uk. Available at: https://www.basw.co.uk/resources/psw-magazine/psw-online/happy-be-social-worker-feeling-pressure-major-survey-finds (Accessed 8 April 2025)
[25] Foster, D. and Foley, N. (2022) *Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Social Work*. House of Commons Library. [online] Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0059 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).
[26] Jeyasingham, D. and Devlin, J. (2024) *Hybrid and Digitally Mediated Practice in Child and Family Social Work: Impacts on More and Less Experienced Practitioners' Communication, Relationships, Sense-Making and Experiences of Work*. The British Journal of Social Work, 54(5), pp. 2163–2180. [online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae025 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025)
[27] Foster, D. and Foley, N. (2022) *Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Social Work*. House of Commons Library. [online] Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0059 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).
[28] Jeyasingham, D. and Devlin, J. (2024) *Hybrid and Digitally Mediated Practice in Child and Family Social Work: Impacts on More and Less Experienced Practitioners' Communication, Relationships, Sense-Making and Experiences of Work*. The British Journal of Social Work, 54(5), pp. 2163–2180. [online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae025 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).

Digital practice can improve collaboration and multi-agency working

One of the clear benefits from the increased use of transactional digital tools such as video conferencing and chat is greater involvement and contact between professionals, in particular schools and the police.[29]

The impact of experience and career stage on adaptation to different ways of working

The literature suggests a complex picture here, in part because of assumptions about age as it relates to technological capability. Byrne and Kirwan[30] point out that younger or newer practitioners are more likely to embrace digital practice and the use of technology, while more experienced social workers might view digital practice as less relational and may be more reluctant to use it. What isn't clear from the literature yet is the impact of integrated digital lives of younger social workers on their attitude to digital practice and hybrid working.

Older or more experienced practitioners may have to work harder to unlearn and relearn ways of working to successfully incorporate digital into their established practice,[31] but this does not hold true for all older and experienced social workers. Earlier research by Research in Practice into the use of digital in post-pandemic practice highlighted the incongruence of the daily multiple use of digital methods and means in the personal lives of social workers, while expressing reluctance to use digital methods as part of professional practice. The belief that relational practice must happen in-person to be effective continues to be a driver for many, rather than being unable to adapt to new technology.

Little attention has been paid in the literature to exploring the additional challenges for supervisors and managers in navigating the world of digital and technology within their own professional practice while also supporting others to do the same.[32] This merits further exploration, to understand the new skills and knowledge needed to effectively

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[29] Bryant, B., Parish, N. and Bunyan, A. (2021). *Better connected: How local education and children's services in England have responded to the coronavirus pandemic*. [online] Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5ce55a5ad4c5c500016855ee/t/605b8c7c001c534b1a223885/1616612479198/LGA_CV19_final+report.pdf

[30] Byrne, J. and Kirwan, G. (2019). *Relationship-based social work and electronic communication technologies: anticipation, adaptation and achievement.* Journal of Social Work Practice, 33(2), pp.217–232. doi:https://doi.org/10.1080/02650533.2019.1604499.

[31] Jeyasingham, D. and Devlin, J. (2024) *Hybrid and Digitally Mediated Practice in Child and Family Social Work: Impacts on More and Less Experienced Practitioners' Communication, Relationships, Sense-Making and Experiences of Work*. The British Journal of Social Work, 54(5) [online] Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae025 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).

[32] British Association of Social Workers (BASW). (2018) *80-20 campaign.* Available at: https://basw.co.uk/policy-and-practice/resources/80-20-campaign-final-report-2018 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).

quality assure digital practice and provide support and advice on developing digital practice skills to social workers.

How hybrid working is changing social work practice

Ferguson et al[33] describe how organisations adapted during the pandemic to value output over physical presence, fostering a culture of flexibility. Foster and Foley[34] note that organisations which promote a wellbeing culture through flexible scheduling and regular in-person collaboration helps to mitigate the stresses of hybrid working. Working practices should be carefully structured to prevent workers feeling isolated.[35]

Prior to COVID-19, social workers had to be physically located near the area they worked in, so they could go to the office each day, and visit families. During the pandemic, some social workers moved out of the area, travelling longer distances to work. Agency social workers worked fully remotely at times, potentially leaving gaps in capacity to respond to families as the social worker's physical presence in the office varies.

Hybrid working can increase workload pressures on the social workers scheduled to be in the office if they have to respond to children and families on a colleague's workload. Many organisations have adapted their practices to accommodate this. Structured team time in the office is often recommended and unions have provided guidance on hybrid working.[36]

[33] Ferguson, H., Pink, S. and Kelly, L. (2022). *The Unheld Child: Social Work, Social Distancing and the Possibilities and Limits to Child Protection during the COVID-19 Pandemic*. The British Journal of Social Work, 52(4). doi:https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcac055.
[34] Foster, D. and Foley, N. (2022) *Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Social Work*. House of Commons Library. [online] Available at: https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0059 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).
[35] www.hbs.edu. (n.d.). *Is Hybrid Work the Best of Both Worlds? Evidence from a Field Experiment - Working Paper - Faculty & Research - Harvard Business School*. [online] Available at: https://www.hbs.edu/faculty/Pages/item.aspx?num=62281 (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).
[36] UNISON National. (n.d.). *Home and Hybrid working | Health and safety*. [online] Available at: https://www.unison.org.uk/get-help/knowledge/health-and-safety/homeworking-and-hybrid-working/ (Accessed 8 Apr. 2025).

Understanding experiences of hybrid working and digital practice

Hybrid working

Following the literature review, 29 people were recruited from the Review, Testing and Implementation Network (RTIN), and the National Workload Action Group, to take part in a series of focus groups and individual interviews to:

- discuss their experiences of hybrid working
- co-produce resources to support successful hybrid working

Participants were recruited from a range of local authorities of different size, structure and location across England. Participants worked in different job roles, and included social workers, supervisors, OD, HR and Business support colleagues, as well as Principal Social Workers and senior leaders. Participants were self-selecting.

As part of the project output, a hybrid working practice tool has been developed which supports social work employers to consider what they need to pay attention to, so they understand more about the impact of hybrid working and flexible working.

Digital practice

The literature review and previous research by Research in Practice formed the basis of the development of practice tools to support social workers to understand their relationship to digital practice, and to understand a young person's digital life.

Focus groups were held with 15 participants drawn from RTIN to test and refine the practice tools. Participants self-selected from a range of local authorities in England. Insights from other project strands were reviewed too, given the centrality of digital in discussions about the use of AI in case recording, workload management, and reducing the administrative burden on social workers. Individual interviews were held with NWAG and RTIN members who were particularly interested in digital practice or wanted to share their experiences.

While project activity did not extend to engaging with children and young people, project evidence was able to draw on the participation of children and young people from earlier activity undertaken by Research in Practice to inform the development of the practice resources.

The focus group sessions involved guided discussions about experiences of digital practice, exploring opportunities and challenges. The sessions supported participants to test a range of digital practice tools and contribute to their development. Interviews were held with NWAG members and others to understand more about employer knowledge about digital practice.

Three practice tools have been developed as part of the NWAG activity on this project. These tools:

- support social workers to explore their own digital experience and understand the gap between their digital lives and those of the children and families they work with
- support social workers to understand the digital reality of children and young people
- explore how relational practice can be used in digital spaces

Project insights

Key messages have been distilled from discussions with NWAG, reviewing the literature and from discussions with RTIN members. These have been separated into ‘hybrid’ and ‘digital’ but we recognise there are cross-cutting elements and hybrid working and digital practice are often conflated in discussion about workforce and workload.

Hybrid working

Hybrid working supports better work-life balance and improved wellbeing

The evidence from the literature review and conversations with RTIN members supports hybrid working as supporting social worker wellbeing, allowing people to plan for flexible working hours, including 9-day fortnights to improve work-life balance. Getting home while it’s still light, and being able to schedule exercise into the working day encourages social workers to balance their personal and professional lives. Hybrid working, and the flexibility it offers, supports a greater focus on diversity and inclusion, particularly for those with caring responsibilities.

To support wellbeing, communication, team days and time in the office should be more structured and less spontaneous to work well for everyone. Hybrid working means that there is greater reliance on email and Teams chat, with the risk of misinterpretation, emails not being read or feeling impersonal. Channel choice can create inequities. Online meetings all day can feel overwhelming, and long-distance travel can impact on wellbeing and effectiveness. Hybrid working is not always available to all staff. Even when hybrid working practices or flexible working are agreed, staff capacity, out of area placement visits, court and meeting dates may take priority.

Formal hybrid working arrangements support equitable access to hybrid or working arrangements

In many workplaces, hybrid working practices were reported to be informal, varying from team to team, and the impact of hybrid working didn’t always appear to be monitored over time. This may lead to inequities and poor practices going unnoticed. Local authorities should be pro-active in developing well-understood hybrid working arrangements, ensuring equitable access to flexible working and hybrid working where possible, ensuring reasonable adjustments are attended to.

Time management skills are essential for most roles but become more important when working in hybrid arrangements. Scheduling activities to maximise office days, blocking out diary time for reflection and paperwork when working at home, and making time to

have breaks from the screen will improve hybrid working experiences. Social workers have always 'managed their diaries' but may require additional support in understanding what works best for them in managing their time in a hybrid world and to reduce unnecessary workload.

Hybrid working practices build an increased sense of trust and autonomy

Being trusted to work productively without continuous oversight builds trust. Social workers reported that they feel that they are more responsible for managing their time and tasks when working in hybrid arrangements. Social workers often report that they do not feel autonomous in their practice, so identifying ways in which appropriate autonomy can be recognised and trust demonstrated is likely to improve social worker wellbeing and retention.

Hybrid working may not work equally well for everyone

Early career social workers may not find the same benefits from hybrid working as more experienced colleagues. Both the literature review and discussions with NWAG members and social workers highlighted that the time early career social workers spend around more experienced social workers helps them:

- understand what's expected from them
- supports them to navigate the complex landscape of practice
- provides informal opportunities to discuss practice issues with colleagues
- promotes a lived understanding of professionalism and belonging to the profession

Hybrid working arrangements can result in some social workers becoming 'invisible' when they are not in the office. This may apply to social workers who are:

- less confident in their use of technology
- experiencing a 'critical career episode'[37] and not feeling positive about work
- unwell or disengaged

[37] Cook, L., Carder, S. and Zschomler, D. (2022). *Retaining and supporting experienced child and family social workers in child protection: Briefing paper*. [online] University of East Anglia. Available at: https://research-portal.uea.ac.uk/en/publications/retaining-and-supporting-experienced-child-and-family-social-work [Accessed 11 Feb. 2025].

Hybrid working is an opportunity to redefine the physical spaces social workers need when they come together as a team or organisation

Traditional office spaces no longer exist in many local authorities, with hot-desking and call centre arrangements in place. But going into the office doesn't mean that you will spend time with colleagues. Hybrid meetings are commonplace, with some team members at home and some in the office, running the risk of isolation or lack of engagement from those working remotely unless there is good hybrid meeting etiquette. There is a clear desire to preserve flexibility, offset by people feeling that they may be missing out if they are not in the office.

The office space, then, is moving from not only being a space from which social workers go out to visit families but a space where social workers need structured time to spend together as a team. Current office spaces may not be designed to accommodate this. This may be an opportunity to rethink the look and feel of office spaces needed to effectively support hybrid working practices and reduce unnecessary workload.

Digital practice

Leadership in the digital world is challenging

Leaders are experiencing the challenge of leading and supporting the social worker workforce to develop practice in the relatively unexplored digital world. In parallel, they are developing their own understanding of their digital reality. Leaders may not understand enough about the digital realities of young people to know how important developing digital practice skills is for the existing and emerging workforce.

The feedback loop for supervisors and leaders is different in digital spaces. Informal feedback is easier to elicit in a physical space. Leaders may need to develop ways of working in digital spaces to encourage feedback or be more intentional in gathering feedback in physical spaces, to understand workforce engagement.

Without an understanding of the importance of digital practice in social work, we may make decisions which reduce choice and control for social workers, and the children and families they work with, about where social work practice takes place. Digital leadership skills are necessary to inform the future direction of social work practice, and to navigate the increasingly digital landscape with a workforce who are more knowledgeable, and more at ease in digital spaces.

Digital exclusion and inequity of the workforce and of families is a growing concern

Digital poverty is a reality for many. This is explored in more detail in the supplementary report on the use of AI in case recording. At the same time, technology continues to advance and become embedded in our everyday lives, without the necessary infrastructure in all areas to support it. The risk of digital exclusion and how this might further increase inequity in our communities (and among our workforce) was a concern for many NWAG members.

Digital exclusion relates to workload in several ways:

- the cost of maintaining a broadband connection suitable for video calls is borne by the social worker working from home. Without broadband, the social worker will have increased travel time, and less time for focused activity
- the lack of digital infrastructure, particularly in rural areas impacts on the extent to which some local and regional areas are able to maximise the benefits of digital working, accelerating digital exclusion of both community and workforce

Action to address this at a national level is needed to prevent the most vulnerable from being further excluded, and to support the social worker workforce in making best use of their time and skills.

Social workers and social work leaders need to know more about the digital realities of young people to understand how the workforce (and practice) needs to change to be fit for the future

The digital realities of young people are very different to the digital realities of the majority of the workforce. Young people move seamlessly between digital and physical spaces, living fully integrated lives.

Social workers and social work leaders reported that they had rich digital lives outside of work, but in work were hampered by outdated CMS, tight controls on the use of laptops and phones applied across the local authority, and a concern that social work must take place in person for it to be meaningful.

The emerging workforce, and the children and young people social workers engage with, have a different ‘digital reality’ and are more comfortable in digital spaces. We urgently need a better understanding of the digital realities of young people and the early career professional, so we can adapt existing systems, processes and structures to best support and retain them, including qualifying programmes.

Mid and late-career social workers and social work leaders need to understand more about the implications of digital practice to provide helpful guidance for social workers and include digital practice in their practice approach.

Key standards should incorporate digital practice along with guidance for social workers and social work employers to encourage consistency and coherence.

The Standards for Employers of Social Workers do not adequately reflect the changing nature of social work practice and would benefit from revision. While they have been 'refreshed' on several occasions, there are gaps in relation to significant changes to ways of working which should be addressed so that they remain current and useful to employers.

Clear guidance from the professional and service regulators about digital practice would support employers to be confident in using digital practice in their practice framework and would inform qualifying programmes and ongoing CPD for the existing workforce.

Conclusion

Hybrid working and digital practice are emerging into mainstream practice, but COVID-19 practices need to be reviewed in order that leaders and managers establish processes, systems and support which meets the needs of the existing and emerging workforce. From the work on this project, NWAG highlighted several priorities to take forward so that social workers – and children and families – benefit from hybrid working and digital practice. The full recommendations are in the NWAG Final Report.

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